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Discipline in education: what it is and when it is justifiable

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Introduction

This entry documents four different philosophies of discipline in education: a punishment philosophy, a rule driven philosophy, a motive-content philosophy and a personal-relational philosophy. In respect to each philosophy, discussion focusses on 1) what discipline is and 2) how its use in education might be justifiable. It is argued that there are at least three ways of justifying the use of discipline in formal educational contexts; when it is rules-based in a way that is morally educational, when it connects student interests and motives to the material to be learned and when it helps students to overcome the human tendency towards ego-centricity. It is also noted that behaviour management approaches problematically dominate disciplinary practices in many Western schools. As such, it is concluded that discipline in education might need to be done very differently in practice, if it is to be educationally justifiable in practice.

Discipline and punishment

This encyclopaedia entry is about discipline in education. It is about what discipline in education is, and it is about when it may be justifiably used (or not) in formal educational contexts such as schools. From the offset, it should be noted that there is probably no single or correct definition of discipline. Similarly, there is probably no one, right way of explaining what discipline *in education* is, or for that matter, *ought to be*. However, and fairly obviously, there are some things that discipline in education is not. So too are there some ways in which discipline in education ought not be carried out. A chief thing that discipline in education *is not*, is *punishment*. There is some confusion about this – confusion that becomes problematic when thinking about discipline in the context of education. This confusion is evident in Michel Foucault's influential text *Discipline and Punish: The birth of the prison*. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault defines discipline as the 'political anatomy of detail' (1991, p 139) in respect to the ordering and controlling of persons in space and time. He describes discipline as a 'modest, suspicious power' (1991, p 170). What does he mean by this?

It needs to be acknowledged that *Discipline and Punish* is open to interpretation as Foucault adopts a loose and obtuse (yet often insightful) writing style. Nonetheless, what he appears to be getting at, is that technologies of discipline in modernity operate and act on persons in a host of ways, in a host of institutions, including schools, factories, hospitals and prisons. Moreover, they act on persons in ways that 'make' them who they are. The technologies of discipline tend to 'make' people who they are by imprinting and reinforcing social norms in to them in ways that stifle resistance against social norms. Discipline tends not to humanize – instead it classifies, it normalizes and it punishes through regimentation, medication, examination and especially through systems of monitoring and surveillance. These technologies of discipline punish all, but perhaps most of all, it punishes those who

deviate from social norms. Discipline is 'suspicious' then for Foucault precisely because it punishes in new, covert and interconnected ways. Indeed, Foucault convincingly shows how practices of punishment underwent a radical shift in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Until then punishment had generally been quite brutal and simple. It was inflicted upon the human body, often in the form of physical torture, for purposes of retribution and/or deterrent. During the nineteenth century, however, new practices of punishment emerged because physical torture was increasingly looked upon as inhuman. Punishment shifted from being an 'art' of 'unbearable sensation' to an 'economy of suspended rights' (1991, p11). Foucault maintained that doctors, teachers, prison wardens and judges all now play a part in suspending the rights of those who deviate from norms. Teachers do of course today carefully monitor student performance and they often do exclude misbehaving students or medicate them. Such approaches to discipline can be punishing.

What Foucault maintains though, is not just that such systems of school discipline are problematic as they are punitive, but also that their punitive effects often do not terminate in the school. Discipline and punishment in educational settings often starts the 'suspicious' work that finds culmination in the prison. His suggestion that regimes of discipline punish people in interconnected ways in various institutions may seem far-fetched. However, there are good reasons for educators to take his ideas seriously. There is growing evidence of a 'school to prison pipeline' in the US for example with those students who are excluded from school for 'misbehaviour' being much more likely to end up in prison than students who are not excluded (MacAllister, 2017). Foucault's work can therefore be read by educators as an invitation for them to think seriously about the long-term implications of their approaches to discipline. Foucault suggests that many practices of discipline in education are not justifiable as they don't educate – instead they punish. However, in calling the new forms of punishment that interested him, *disciplines*, Foucault arguably hides from view a number of ways in which discipline might *educate* instead of punish. This is not to say that the new forms of discipline that emerged in modernity do not sometimes or indeed often punish. However, they do not *always* punish. More importantly - discipline is not synonymous with punishment. It is to the questions of how discipline is different from punishment and how it might support the ends of education that I now turn. Identifying connections between discipline and the ends of education is important as it is from here on contended that discipline in education is justifiable when it supports the ends of education and unjustifiable when it does not.

Discipline, rules and education

How is discipline different from punishment then? According to Hirst & Peters (1975) discipline is about following the rules inherent in a given activity. Punishment, in contrast, is what occurs when the rules that govern an activity have not been adhered to. Similarly, Durkheim (1961) maintained that the only reason for having punishment in education is to reinforce discipline. The two processes are not the same. As Hirst & Peters put it, punishment is 'conceptually distinct from discipline' (1975, p 128) and must 1. involve pain and unpleasantness 2) be inflicted by someone in authority 3) on someone who has breached rules. Discipline in contrast need not be painful or emanate from someone in authority. The argument here is not that Hirst & Peters and Durkheim are wholly correct about the discipline and punishment relation and Foucault wholly wrong. Instead the

contention is that though discipline and punishment may be related they are not equivalent. Why do Durkheim, Hirst & Peters conclude that discipline is more than anything about rules? This would seem to be a very Kantian way of thinking about discipline and education. Though Immanuel Kant is most famous for his moral philosophy, he also delivered lectures on education (2003). In these lectures, he thought in considerable depth about the importance of discipline in education. He was the first philosopher to do so. In the same way that rules are at the heart of his moral philosophy so too are they at the heart of his thinking on education. Kant argued that discipline is a necessary, but negative part of moral education. Negative in the sense that it involves a restraining and re-training of the child's natural animal instincts and unruliness. Though discipline is only a negative precursor to formal instruction, Kant nevertheless thought discipline was a vital first phase of education. Indeed, Kant thought mistakes in early discipline could never be overcome. Discipline is needed as this is the process by which the young become acquainted with the laws of mankind. Experience of the laws of mankind helps the young to shed their unruly animal selves and become more human.

He argued that discipline in education should entail rule following, routine and perhaps most important of all - the instilling of a sense of duty. Children, he says should 'not be full of feeling, but they should be full of the idea of duty' (Kant, 2003, p 104). At first children only need dutifully obey 'school maxims'. They should have set times for work, sleep and play. However, in time, Kant thought it vital that children learn to think for themselves. Indeed, this was for Kant the end of education – student autonomy. Discipline in education is a necessary first step in the process of children learning to think for themselves and treat others with dignity, where discipline is largely a matter of children following rules. Durkheim (1961) was very influenced by Kant. He too felt that discipline should be a matter of dutiful rule following and routine for the wider purpose of moral education. Durkheim, like Kant, thought that rules ought to help children order their desires and be binding. However, unlike Kant, Durkheim maintained that there was never any educational justification for the physical punishment of children in school. While Kant, thought gentle physical chastisement may sometimes be merited, Durkheim insisted that beating children was entirely at variance with the (Kantian) notion of treating all persons with dignity. As such Durkheim maintained there is no educational or moral justification for corporal punishment. Before moving on, it is worth mentioning that Kant seemed to hold a rather naive belief that a 'good education' founded in no small part on a routine and rules-based discipline, could work for the good of all of humanity. This is worth mentioning as it was precisely such naivety about discipline in education that Foucault was seeking to question.

Discipline, educational content and the motive for learning

While Kant and Durkheim regarded discipline as a vital part of moral education, they did not think it was connected to the actual processes or content of educational instruction. Discipline was a matter of getting students ready to learn what really matters – it was not part of important learning itself. Hirst and Peters, however, thought differently. They argued that etymologically speaking the word 'discipline' comes from the Latin 'disco' which roughly translates as 'I learn'. For them 'the root idea is that of submission to rules which have to be learnt' (Hirst & Peters, 1975, p 125). Here it is worth noting that Hirst & Peters

think discipline is necessary in education precisely because learning any complex activity involves learning the rules that make that activity what it is. To explain this point they give examples of the rules of a good golf swing, the rules in grammar and the rules in school subjects. School subjects, they say, are called disciplines for the very reason that learners have to submit to the rules that govern them. Thus, for Hirst and Peters discipline is not prior to learning. It is the very essence of learning itself. It is the hard work that is necessary to become acquainted with a skill or body of knowledge. To be disciplined in education is for them to submit to learning the rules that govern the content of education. Such submission may be self or externally imposed. Hirst & Peters indicated a strong preference for self-discipline (describing it as a personal excellence) as it respects the autonomy of persons and preserves the connection between the child's own curiosity and motives to learn with the material to be learned. In this respect Hirst & Peters acknowledge a debt to progressive educators. They may well have had Dewey in mind here. Dewey developed an extremely novel account of discipline in his famous 1916 book *Democracy and Education*.

There he argued that student interests need to be disciplined in education. He suggested that discipline is an intelligent habit. In particular, it is the: 1) capacity to set goals based on one's interests and 2) persevere in the pursuit of these goals and interests. Dewey was very critical of the practices of discipline in schools in the early to mid-twentieth century. He felt they tended to sever the connection between student interest and the material to be learned by focussing on rewards and punishments rather than better disciplining the curiosity and interests of students. Dewey, like Hirst & Peters, held that valuable learning often requires discipline. However, an important distinction needs to be noted between the work of Dewey and Hirst & Peters. For Hirst & Peters discipline was a matter of becoming acquainted with specific skills and bodies of knowledge that are governed by rules, where discipline entails submission to the rules. Dewey by contrast did not think that discipline was at heart a matter of submitting to rules – instead it was a matter of intelligently persevering in the pursuit of valued interests and goals in the face of challenge and difficulty. Dewey also did not think discipline was very educational when externally imposed. Discipline needs to connect student interests and motives to the material to be learned – it should not rely on artificial inducements. Hirst & Peters by contrast maintained that classrooms full of students with different interests and needs generally require minimum conditions of order before learning can proceed - and that because of this externally imposed discipline is sometimes warranted. In spite of these differences Hirst, Peters and Dewey were united by the belief that discipline is most educationally justifiable when it connects student motivation to learn with the specific content to be learned.

Discipline and personal relationships

Dewey's thinking on discipline directly influenced Pat Wilson, who devoted an entire book (1971) to exploring connections between interest, discipline and education. Dewey may well have influenced the Scottish philosopher John Macmurray too. In a series of public radio lectures (1961), Macmurray spoke of two different ways of arranging discipline in education – traditional and personal. On the traditional view discipline is largely a matter of a community initiating students in to their knowledge and values with this initiation being justified on account of its likely long term benefit to students and wider society. On the

personal view, discipline must support students to explore what they take to be valuable in their experiences. Macmurray, like Dewey, emphasised the need for students to be disciplined by *experiences* more than knowledge and rules. However, Macmurray also stressed that discipline must focus on a *particular sort* of educational experience. Experiences that help students to become more human. For Macmurray, education involves transcending the human tendency toward egocentricity. Such transcendence is not easy – it takes discipline.

Thus, for Macmurray, discipline in education involves learning how to relate with other persons in such a way that other persons are not treated as objects to be used but as ends in themselves. This may sound Kantian in spirit, but it is not, in at least one crucial way. Macmurray emphasised that the discipline that is needed when learning to relate with others in a non-egocentric way is based on an *emotional sensitivity* to the particularities of other persons rather than a learning how to treat others respectfully via rational objectivity and dutiful rule following. While Macmurray did not provide much in the way of specific advice to teachers about how to arrange discipline in a personal way his thinking can be interpreted as an extension of Dewey's. Dewey thought discipline in education could help to make society more progressive through a focus on developing and extending student interests rather than the imposition of rules and values in to students. Macmurray, in contrast, thought it could improve society by helping students learn how to become more human, that is, by helping them learn how to relate with each other in more personal and less ego-centric ways. For Macmurray discipline is educationally justifiable when it so helps students learn to be human – it is not justifiable when it does not.

Conclusion

The foregoing discussion has explored how discipline in education can be defined and conceptualised in different ways. What is perhaps most important for educators and educational researchers to remember though is that discipline need not be (and indeed should not be) regarded as synonymous with punishment. Foucault was right about one thing though – practices of discipline in education all too often punish students. But this does not mean that discipline is the same thing as punishment. Nor does it mean that discipline cannot be justified in education. In this chapter, it was therefore maintained that discipline in education is justified when it contributes to the ends of education and it is not justifiable when it does not. How might discipline contribute to the ends of education? This review of philosophical literature on discipline in education suggests there are at least three different ways that discipline might be justifiably used in formal educational contexts; 1) when it is rules based in a way that is morally educational, 2) when it connects student interests and motives to the material to be learned and 3) when it helps students to overcome the human tendency towards ego-centricity. Each of these theories of discipline has weaknesses (MacAllister, 2017). Indeed, Foucault revealed how strongly normative and surveillance based forms of discipline of the sort defended by Kant and Durkheim might not morally educate all the time or even at all. They might, more than anything, punish students, and especially those who transgress.

However, what all these theories do encourage is reflection about how practices of discipline might be connected to the ends of education. Unfortunately, the currently

dominant way of doing discipline in education in many Western schools is behavioural managerial (MacAllister, 2017). Tom Bennett, is a well-known and influential (he has recently advised the Department for Education in England) advocate of behaviour management approaches. He maintains that teachers should seek to control students, because it is good for them (Bennett, 2010). However, practices of discipline in education that seek to manage and control students may most often only punish them, especially in the long term. What this encyclopaedia entry has shown, in contrast, is that discipline in education is most justifiable, not, when it punishes, but when it is connected to the ends of education. Behaviour managerial approaches can only at best establish tenuous connections between discipline and the ends of education. In so far as these approaches dominate practice, discipline in education might therefore need to be done very differently in practice, if discipline is to be educationally justifiable in practice.

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